

Hatch and Stanchion Violations Can Hurt

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Several years ago I was stationed on a ship where three shipmates sustained serious injuries and five had minor injuries—all from hatches, scuttles, ladders, and associated equipment. I’ve since wondered how many fleet Sailors continue to be injured by these seemingly harmless shipboard “necessities.”

The answer came during my tour as a damage control surveyor at the Naval Safety Center, where during three years of visiting scores of ships, I’ve noted countless hatch and stanchion violations. Included are loose, missing, or unauthorized pins, hatches held open by unauthorized or unapproved material, missing stanchions, and improper locking devices. Along with material violations, I’ve also observed procedural errors, such as individual Sailors lifting heavy hatches by themselves.

During one mishap, an AO2 slipped on a ladder’s top step and tumbled downward—during his trip he grabbed for a missing safety chain. He continued tumbling down the ladder until he came to an abrupt stop. He suffered a compound fracture to his leg and several other injuries.

In another mishap, an ABF3 was finishing work on a mogas (motor gasoline) sponson. When exiting the hatch from the mogas CO₂ bottle room, the Sailor attempted to transit a three-by-three-foot hatch (opened earlier for inspection access to the space). The hatch had been tied and held with manila line, attached at a 90-degree angle and with no stanchions in place. When exiting the space, the PO3 held the hatch with his left hand, while with his right hand he untied the line from the bulkhead. Once the line cleared, he inadvertently placed his fingers over the edge of the hatch instead of grabbing the handle on top of the hatch. You guessed it: The young petty officer broke some fingers. As he closed the hatch and passed through the 90-degree position, the hatch’s weight overtook him and slammed his fingers between the hatch and the knife-edge.



The ship’s medical team was happy to administer the “Edward Scissorhands” treatment and outfit the PO3 with numerous pins and metal splints to repair his badly fractured fingers.

Finally, an FN slipped on steps while going down a ship’s ladder. As he fell, he grabbed the quick-acting, watertight scuttle for support. The scuttle’s safety lock failed, causing the scuttle to fall onto the fireman’s hand. The resulting injury was an amputated finger on one hand.

Could these mishaps have been avoided? You bet. The potential for mishaps involving ladders, stanchions or scuttles can be reduced by making sure all such devices are installed properly and complete with all required associated equipment, and they are maintained according to PMS requirements. Regularly inspect your ladders’ material condition, looking for worn rungs or steps. Make sure the nonskid strips are not worn. Walk through your spaces having ladders, scuttles, etc., and if you see something broken, or improper, secure the area until repairs are completed.

Always use two people when opening and closing heavy hatches. Never close hatches from underneath them. Most important, always inform your supervisor when you see something is not right or is unsafe, or if equipment is missing. ☺